

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 525

CS 209 629

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TITLE CAI and English Composition for the Multi-Cultural/Lingual Student.
PUB DATE Oct 85
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (20th, Portland, ME, October 24-26, 1985) and to be presented at the New England Computing Conference (Plymouth, NH, November 2, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Assisted Instruction; *English (Second Language); English Instruction; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; *Second Language Learning; Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS Bunker Hill Community College MA

ABSTRACT

Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, Massachusetts, supports a prodigious English as a Second Language (ESL) program, which attracts large numbers of Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other minority language groups. They are accepted in the program only after they have learned the basic "survival" skills in the various pre-ESL programs around the city. They spend from two to three semesters in the ESL program before they are eligible for entry into a mainstream program, which usually places them in English 101. This program uses computer assisted instruction because it is designed to teach students to like to write and deals with the tedious process of rewriting and editing, an enticing approach for students who have difficulty learning a new language. Using the available tutorials for the "Volkswriter" word processing software, a series of steps was designed to help students write a few paragraphs on IBM personal computers. Students spend three hours in class work plus two hours in the computer lab each week. Around the fifth week, they are ready to use the computer on their own. They are also required to spend at least one of their computer hours working on developmental software to improve their skill at recognizing sentence errors, improve their vocabulary, and develop reading skills. Time conflicts between students working on programming and the ESL students, as well as frequent "down time" for the IBM programs have been serious problems in the computer lab, but they did not appear to affect enrollment. Twenty new computers, several printers, and different software programs have recently been added to the lab. (HTH)

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CAI AND ENGLISH COMPOSITION FOR THE MULTI-CULTURAL/LINGUAL STUDENT

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PAPER:

PREPARED FOR THE NORTHEAST REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE AT PORTLAND, MAINE (OCTOBER 24-26, 1985 AND THE NEW ENGLAND COMPUTING CONFERENCE AT PLYMOUTH STATE COLLEGE PLYMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE NOVEMBER 2, 1986

CAI AND ENGLISH COMPOSITION FOR THE MULTI-CULTURAL/LINGUAL STUDENT

DR. SHIRLEY DUNBAR

BUNKER HILL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ETHNICITY AND PROFILE AT BUNKER HILL

Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, Massachusetts is a melting pot for ethnic diversity. Although there are over 16 languages and cultures represented at this college, emigrants from Southeast Asia number over 15% of the population: in effect, the highest percentage of Asian-Americans enrolled in any of the Commonwealth's public colleges (Klayman, 1985 p. 10). The college supports a prodigious ESL program and it is this program that attracts the large numbers of Hispanics, Asian Americans and other minority language groups.

For the past 12 years the mission of this college was to serve as an experimental, non-traditional academic institution that served urban and suburban students. To this goal it was deemed that all courses be designed in individualized, self-paced formats that allowed the individual student to begin at his or her own entering level (by criterion-referenced test) and progress to the ultimate goals of the course at mastery-level completion. Essentially, this approach to the educational process for such diverse students has worked remarkably well, particularly in the area of language development in English.

Our students have evolved into a rather traditional constituency. The average age is between 18-21. There is a median income below that of the state as a whole. Employed females are usually also head of households or significantly contribute to total family income. 90% of all students work 20 hours a week or more. It is not unusual to find a student who works until 2 AM show up in an 8 or 9 o'clock class. The jobs that they perform are in the area of service work within the private sector: jobs that tend to be low paying and labor intensive. The college accepts that part-time work and a student's educational commitment are not philosophically at conflict. All students have rising expectations. They expect to be trained to assume mid-level positions that allow them to move to middle-class salaries.

ENGLISH TRAINING AND THE ESL STUDENT

Foreign-born and/or immigrant students arrive at Bunker Hill through the ESL doorway. They are accepted in this program only after they have learned the basic "survival" skills in the various pre-ESL programs around the city. They usually spend from two to three

semesters in the ESL program before they are eligible to be considered for entry into a mainstream program. At this time, they may enter any program of their choice in which there is space. Moving from ESL to mainstream English usually places them in College English 101. This is a program that begins with developing error-free sentences and moves them to development of a full paragraph of no less than 8-10 sentences in good form.

This is a very difficult program for most foreign students, and I might add for quite a large number of our American-born students as well. Many skills must be perfected before any marked achievement is apparent. It is also necessary to make them computer literate in an ever changing technological field. To combine these two objectives is to move to computer-assisted instruction. While this may sound like a fairly simple task, it is not. Why then should we bother to involve the use of a computer with a student who is already having great difficulty learning a new language?

If you asked this question of some elementary school teachers they would tell you that using the computer "facilitates the writing process better than pencil and paper" (Quincy Patrior Ledger October 7, 1985). They would add that it is designed to teach students to like to write, and deal with the tedious process of rewriting and editing. It is an enticing approach. I agree. Except that when you are teaching students who are still translating from one language to another it has even more benefits. The computer allows them time to "think and translate" in place (Ledger). It gives them a platform to experiment with a new language. It is non-punitive. It gives them freedom to create, to develop at their own pace, to spend as much time as they want making changes that would otherwise take endless hours of painstaking writing and rewriting. And, it reduces frustration.

TRAINING THE TEACHER

This subject is so vast and complicated, I make no attempt at "how it should be done" but rather present an account of "how it was done". Teachers must make students who are linguistically and culturally different comfortable with the technology. Aside from the issues of equal educational opportunity, each student entering mainstream college level English deserves a fair share of what computers and software have to offer. Computer literacy, like ESL and bilingual education means different things to different people. To quote Dr. Martha Mylona, who wrote the Notebook on Computer Literacy Training, computer literacy is defined as knowledge of computer capabilities and ability to use appropriately programmed computers to assist in instructional tasks (Mylona, 1984 p. 6).

For some of us who teach College English I at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) and who have integrated into our courses students who come from many different cultures and who may or may not have had the advantage of a formal ESL course, the task of education became more complicated. Such a multiplicity of language and culture presents very complex problems that we had not dealt with before. For example, Spring semester, 1985, provided me with a single section of College English I that had over eleven languages and cultures represented. Let me list them for you: Chinese: Mandarin (2); Chinese: Cantonese (3); Vietnamese (6); Cambodian (3); Indian (1); Arabian (2); Haitian (3); Cape Verdian (2); Azores (4); Italian (1); France (1); African (3);

Mexican (1); Central America (2); Venezuela (2); and, American (3). It was the first time I seriously considered retirement. It was also the first time I had available enough hardware to begin to use CAI effectively: 5 IBM PC's networked to a Tallgrass hard disk.

This was a very large section and normal attrition soon leveled it off to a more workable 28 students. Regardless, the task of training all these students from so many different backgrounds was initially overwhelming. I soon realized that three semesters of ESL is not enough to begin mainstreaming, but this is all that is allowed by our credit-granting policy and the policy of financial aid, from which most of these students drew life-sustaining incomes for themselves and their families. Almost all of the Asian students were refugees who had been displaced by political and economic oppression. They, most of all, needed to be educated quickly and effectively so that they could take their places in society and become supporting. Language development was the all-important key. The youngest of this group was 19, the oldest 64.

Early the previous Fall, several of us had purchased some simple, we thought, software to begin the task of developmental work in English. We were novices. No one trained us to do anything. One by one we visited the "faculty lab" which had been provided for us by the Dean of Academic Instruction. This lab consisted of one IBM PC and a printer. We could use it any time we wanted to and there was a computer "systems" person to help us out. It took me four weeks to learn my way around the PC plus a simple word-processing program called Volkswriter. I don't mean I mastered it. I just mean that I could use it in a very simplistic way. As I struggled through the task of making the computer do what I wanted, I began to see ways that a student could do the same thing, and perhaps in even less time. Using the available tutorials in this program I began to design the steps that students might need to simply write a few paragraphs. It seemed easy. They should learn to use from the menu only those things which were important for the task: edit, save, retrieve and exit. From the IBM orientation disk they would get all the information they needed to find the proper keys to use with the program. I had also purchased some developmental programs: the English Achievement Series, interactive programs that allow the student to do the problem and receive immediate feedback on his or her work. Because explanations are given after each problem, students learn from their mistakes. These programs were designed for the College Entrance Examination Board's English Achievement Exam and are simple to use; Speed Read and Speed Read + to develop basic reading skills; and, Word Attack and Word Whiz to build vocabulary.

TRAINING THE STUDENT

Students were required to spend three hours in class work plus two hours in the computer lab each week. Emphasis by objective was placed on common sentence errors: fragments or run-on, tense, adjective/adverb, subject/verb, pronoun antecedent, pronoun case and reference, dangling elements, misplaced modifier, faulty comparison, parallel structure, shift in voice, punctuation, diction, cliché and mixed metaphor, plus, paragraph forms. Class work consisted of one hour of grammar and punctuation using explanation and a workbook with lots of examples. Workbook exercises were post-tested by objective. Two hours a week were spent writing sentences and paragraphs that were

directed, drafted, corrected and rewritten: after which they were entered into the computer for grading. Students were expected to do homework and attend all classes. More than three unexcused absences meant no grade until the time missed had been made up and all assigned work completed. Self-paced education allows our students to work at their own pace and receive a grade only when the program has been satisfactorily completed. We make a distinction between self-paced and non-paced.

Time in the computer lab was spent in the following way. The first two weeks were to be used in learning their way around the IBM by using the orientation disk provided by the company. The next two weeks were spent learning to use only the Volkswriter Tutorial. There are four such tutorials in this program, but it was determined that these students need not go beyond what was taught in the first section. With this much information they could easily accomplish the objectives for the course, which was to simply put their corrected paragraphs into the computer and edit and change their language until it was correct. Every six weeks and at the end of the semester, I collected and graded their disks. This was done by making editing comments directly on each student's disk and placing a grade for the work also on the disk. Students had the option of accepting the given grade or of correcting the work again for an improved grade. They were not allowed to use the printer until the end of the program when they were given a complete printout of their work. Each student was required to purchase a single double-sided 5 1/4" floppy disk which was formatted by personnel in the computer lab.

Around the fifth week students were ready to use the computer on their own to begin the task of writing their own material. In conjunction with this, they were also required to spend at least one of their computer hours working on developmental software to improve their skill at recognizing sentence error, to build up their vocabulary and to develop reading skills. Every three or four weeks throughout the semester I gave an exam in class based on what was being taught in the computer programs. This was done simply as an incentive to make sure that they were really paying attention to the task to be accomplished.

WAS IT SUCCESSFUL?

Students using CAI are different from students who are studying programming. Although I tried unsuccessfully to separate the two both philosophically and physically, the lack of sufficient hardware prevented this from becoming a reality. Therefore, both types of students use the lab and its time schedules simultaneously. Management became a key issue as well as territory. I never knew it before, but programmers can become violent if deprived of their perceived time on the hardware, and are very reluctant to give up their machines when involved in developing a program. CAI students, on the other hand, are timid, not sophisticated in the technology and need a lot of support systems in order to be successful at the computer. I soon found myself spending a lot of time in the computer lab. Far beyond what I intended, in order to protect both my students using the CAI software, and the turf. Although we have two well-trained people available to work with students, they simply did not have enough time to work both with the programmers and the CAI people.

Another problem which quickly presented itself was the equipment. The

hard disk had a personality and mind of its own. It did, as they say, its own thing. Sometimes it worked very well, but too many times it didn't work at all. This "down" time created mild havoc when work was due, or tests were scheduled, to say nothing about the morale in general. But students were more adaptable than I thought and I soon found them compensating by adding hours on their own, sometimes on the saturday schedule when there were longer times available. I was also suprised to find many students sneaking in hours that were "extra", hanging around the lab hoping that some student didn't show up for their time and they could get in some more time on their own.

I worried about attrition, usually at about 40% It didn't happen. Attrition for this section was only 20%, and it stayed there until the end of the semester. Of the 80% remaining 60% completed the program and moved on to the next level of English. The other 20% remained with an "incomplete" status to either bring their work up to level, or to complete modules that were still unfinished at the end of the year.

SUMMARY

The first attempt at CAI in a developmental program which mostly consisted of students from diverse cultures and languages was, in my opinion, successful. The use of the computer greatly enhanced the students' ability to learn English as a second language within a short period of time. It must be remembered that the level of the ESL transfer student was far below that of his/her English speaking counterpart and that language development at the end of the 15 week semester was still not up to par with the American student in terms of level of expertise in sentence and paragraph development. There were no miracles. Yet, there was a great leap in skill improvement for this population.

And we have grown. As a teacher, I am far more skilled in handling this population than before. I am also more confident with my own computer skills. We have just put in place a series of workshops to assist other faculty who want to move in this direction. We now know that it takes about a year and a half when a teacher makes up his or her mind to move to CAI until the time when they can be "on-line". This means learning to use the computer themselves, learning how to search out and buy their software, become familiar with the software and how it works, prepare the materials for the class and finally, put it all together by using it with a class.

We now have over 25 different software programs in different disciplines. We have added 10 more IBM XT's which are free-standing, 10 Apples and a variety of printers - all to be used for CAI. Incidentally, there is not now, nor has there ever been, any money in our fiscal budget allocated for this purpose: the Massachusetts legislature does not support this sort of thing. We are grateful to the Division of Continuing Education and the creative financing of our Academic Deans to give us these humble beginnings. CAI for the culturally and linguistically different student has assisted us in training this type of English student more efficiently and more effectively. I have postponed retirement for a few more years.

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